

Episode 31: You are not the King.

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode thirty-one: You are not the King.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I left the party early. Io was swept up in an odd mix of sincere and bitter congratulations, Cassian and I along with him, but I could feel bile building in my throat and I didn't trust myself not to throw up all over some laird's shoes. There's a poison to having fucked up that badly. It sits in your stomach and turns your blood to rot. Somewhere in the world, Leander was running, and somewhere in the world, the real king sat, and maybe that did make me the solider or maybe I was nothing more than the Girl Who Starts It All, and I would be slain as the tyrant I'd become.

I'd believed in it all. *Gods*, had I believed in it all.

So the second I could break away, I stumbled from the hall, made for my room as fast as I could. I didn't even know what I would do when I got there — pack? Climb onto the roof? Lie facedown on my bed and sob? — but I had to go — somewhere. I was only halfway to the staircase when I heard the grand old doors open and slam shut somewhere behind me -- then harried footsteps, then Cassian, calling out, *Ilyaas, wait, Ilyaas.*

I whirled around. Anger suddenly filled me, roiling in my stomach, as the consequences of this feast hit me like a bus. *Do you realize what you've done?* I shouted. *They were right there -- Leander -- why would you choose Io? Why would you pick him? He'll stab you in the back the second your eyes close.*

I tried -- he said. There was some level of desperation in his voice, his eyes ablaze with something between fear and hope. *I told her about Leander, but Io --*

Her. there was only one "her" he meant, and this was English, where gendered pronouns were clear as day. *Her* meant the queen. She was scared, I realized. Scared, because she'd realized, long ago, whatever prophecy this was painted her as the enemy. Rhia's words came to me: *let me tell you everything I know: she fears he is the reason she will lose her crown.* And here she was, trying to manipulate fate. Trying to make Cassian a hero to save her soul.

Io is not the poet. I growled. *You are not the king.*

He recoiled as if I'd slapped him. *Ilyaas*. It hurt. The way he said my name.

Cassian. I said. Softer. *Cassian*. *We can set this right*.

Set what right?

This world, I snapped. *We can help the people and make this something better. We can bring magic and peace -- we can stop the fighting, we can work with the rebels -- we can -- fix this. All of this. All that this has become.*

I could see the shift the second I said the word *rebel*. The gears in his head began turning once more. Logic, logic, logic. Maintain his position. Maintain what he had. He wasn't wrong if he never admitted it.

God, I'd done the same thing.

There's nothing to fix, Ilyaas. Not like you're suggesting.

Cassian -- louder. Anger had returned.

You forget yourself, he snapped. *I am the king here, and you are sworn to me, and Io has been made our third.*

This isn't what the prophecy says --

Fate and the creation of destiny are the same. This world belongs to those that seize the future before them and ask themselves why not? A prophecy is a role anyone can fill. It's just an archetype of a hero.

Archetype. I'd taught him that word. We'd laughed about it, late one night, and I'd been so wine-drunk I'd had a hard time

remembering it. *Tip of my tongue*, I'd slurred, and he'd laughed. I'd felt it in his chest. I was lying on his stomach.

Archetype he'd lilted, testing out the word on his tongue. I'd giggled at how he'd said it. It didn't belong here, not in this fight. A good memory in the midst of all this venom.

I made my first mistake in my next words. *I took Leander's hand tonight. Their veins were gold through their wrist. Is that an archetype or a destiny, Cassian?*

He froze. *What?*

It hit me, then. No matter what we said of Leander, no matter what he felt, he would keep Io. Because Io was a promise. Io as the poet reaffirmed his belief: anyone can fill this role. If Io was the poet, if heroes were laid out by a prophecy for anyone to fill, if fate was something you walked into rather than had thrust at you, then he was everything he dreamed.

King. Hero.

Tell a lie. Turn it into the truth. Bury the shame so far down it no longer stands.

Hadn't I been doing the same thing?

Cassian, I said, more hesitant now. *They're magic. A different magic, like me.*

He shook his head. *No one has golden blood. It's impossible. It was a mistake of the light, or they painted it to turn you just like this. Fates are not predetermined, Ilyaas.*

What he meant was this: *let it be impossible. Please see what I mean.*

He was a pawn as much as I was. And I was frustrated with myself and him and Leander, running, and Io, gloating. *Do you think what we're doing is right, Cassian?* I asked, cold.

What? This wasn't what he had been expecting.

I was on a roll now, all my fears coming boiling out. *How many people have we killed? How is that right? How can we not call ourselves tyrants, Cassian, after all we've done?*

We're fighting the terrorists, he snapped. *Those that would raze Rhysea to the ground --*

Then why haven't they? I cried. *They stay outside of a village and the village thrives because of it. We're the ones that burn their corpses and march through like marauders. How the people's faces sour as we ride through, come to vanquish the fretim that has helped them. It seems that we're the tyrants, you know, it seems we're the unwelcome ones --*

How do you know that word? Fretim? He said suddenly. *The rebels. Fretim. I did not teach you that word.*

I froze, panicked. Rhia taught it to me, late one night, brows furrowed as she chased her *let me tell you everything I know's* with *but don't tell them, don't let them know*. Only the rebels called themselves the *fretim*. Everyone else was too

scared of the word. Called them *rebels* or *tyrants* or nothing at all.

That was my second error.

Don't change the subject, I snapped. *It doesn't matter.*

Yes, Cassian said, his voice low. I'd forgotten, under all we'd become, that there still existed that soldier-prince from the first day in the rain, when he'd kicked my knees out from under me and forced me to kneel. Yes, *it does. Who taught it to you? A soldier? One of the poets?*

And then something sparked in his eyes. No, he said. Softly, aching. Hoping he was wrong. *Rhia.*

But it wasn't a question.

I don't quite remember what happened next. Flashes of conversation, flashes of expression, but more than anything, I just remember the searing desperation I'd felt. I begged. That I do recall. I made him promises about our future, that I'd be anything he wanted -- *We can change this together, we can create our own destiny, far away from here. Just -- let. Rhia. Be.*

I thought he would listen. An expression crossed his face -- something I still can't put a name to, no matter how much I'd known him. Maybe it was hope. Maybe it was understanding. That's what I'd thought it was at the time -- so I kept talking.

If prophecy is an archetype, you can choose something else, Cassian -- we both can -- we can let someone else fill old shoes

and we can just create something new. We can take down the kings, we can rule, we can --

Then his countenance changed again. And this time, I'd seen grim resignation enough times to know what was coming before he opened his mouth.

It was the same face he always made before he gave the order to burn the rebel's bodies.

I'm sorry, Ilyaas, he said, and then, in Rhysean, as he pulled his sword from his waist, he called for guards. Find the Menstrana de, he shouted. And bring her here.

I panicked, tried to run past him back to the great hall -- but he put out his sword, and mine was still up in my room, calling, thrumming, making my head off-kilter. *Peril anil*, I snapped, my hands swinging wide, and Cassian flew back across the room, sword clattering in one direction and him going in another.

From the doorway to the great hall, two guards emerged, dragging Rhia with them. Four more came behind them, and one cursed, loudly, in Rhysean, as they took in Cassian on the floor, my hands still glowing.

Put her down -- I yelled, my Rhysean rough. I didn't know a spell to separate them. Wasn't sure how to use my magic without hurting her. If I could disappear them all -- if I had known how --

But then there were more -- all around me -- and I realized, suddenly, that Cassian had hit his head, that Cassian wasn't conscious, and one of them said, *what do we do? What do we do?* And it was Hildegarde, their armor on, still on duty, that stood up from where they'd knelt beside Cassian and said, simply, *knock her out.*

And -- I lifted my arms to try and push them all back, but someone moved faster than my hands and my breath. A sharp pain hit the back of my head, and I was gone.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at patreon.com/backagainpodcast, where you'll gain access to bloopers, annotated transcripts, episode sneak-peeks, and more! If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from

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